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St. John's Episcopal Church
Epiphany 4

Annual Meeting Day

JESUS FINDING HIS VOICE

Jesus has been through a lot by the time he arrives at Nazareth for his first and probably last sermon in his hometown. He is about 30 years old. He has lived to see and feel the punishing consequences of the Roman occupation. He has witnessed dire poverty, predatory taxation, uprisings, and the corruption of the religious elite.

More recently, he has been baptized by John in the Jordan and then led out into the wilderness for 40 days of challenge and testing. From the river's water and life to the aridity of the desert. Blessed and empowered by the Spirit, he then begins his public ministry. He is spiritually on fire when he comes back to his hometown.

Jesus is anything but hesitant in fulfilling his prophetic call. His debut makes a strong contrast to Jeremiah's reluctant response to God's call. Jeremiah says, "Ah Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." His struggles and doubts are real and eminently recognizable to us.

((God rebukes him, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I shall send you." Who could blame the young prophet for trying to avoid his assignment? His dread was realistic. In the execution of his duties, he would indeed meet with rejection, attacks and ridicule. Having heard enough of Jeremiah's timidity, God then touches his lips to put His words on them. Jeremiah is then empowered, but even with God's assurances of protection, reluctance and doubt will be his constant companions in his prophetic calling.))

Madeline L'Engle was once asked, "Do you believe in God without any doubts?" She replied, "I believe in God with *all* my doubts." Jeremiah served God faithfully in spite of his ambivalence and complaints.

Then there is Jesus. In his home synagogue he and his message are muscular and fearless. There is no obvious pastoral sensitivity or political calculation. Whereas Jeremiah was uncertain, Jesus is audacious and aggressive. He has found his voice, and in this setting, it is forceful and disruptive.

Last Sunday we heard that after Jesus arrives in Nazareth, he goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath to preach. He reads a passage from Isaiah, which foretells the coming of a new era of justice, deliverance and healing. Isaiah, who lived 500 years before Jesus, looks forward to the coming of the Messiah. After Jesus reads the passage, he tells the congregation that on *this day*, they have seen the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise, clearly suggesting that Jesus is the one who is ushering in the new era.

At first, the people are amazed and speak well of him. Then they begin to wonder who he is. Isn't this the boy we knew when we were young, the son of the carpenter, Joseph? Jesus then seems to read the crowd's thoughts and challenges them. He says, "*You are*

probably thinking that if I can do all those healings in Capernaum, why not perform some miracles here too? Prophets gain honor in many places but not in their hometowns.”

It is hard for us to release people we know from the old and familiar ways of perceiving them. This is sometimes the case in families. When one member returns after a long absence or a significant growth experience, other family members may not see or welcome the changes in him or her.

Back to our story... Jesus presses the congregants even further, to the point where simmering anger turns towards violent rage.

What does he say that so infuriates him? He recalls two stories involving two of the greatest Hebrew prophets, Elijah and Elisha. In both stories, God sends the prophet to the aid of a foreigner, an enemy of Israel, even though there are many Israelis who need help.

((In the first story, there has been a three and a half year drought accompanied by severe famine throughout the land. People in Israel are desperate. There are many people to whom God could have sent Elijah. But, instead, God sends him to help a widow in Zarephath in Sidon, in Gentile territory. The Gentiles of Sidon are the sworn enemies of Israel. Why would God send Elijah to rescue a widow *there* rather than to the many widows in Israel?)

The second story concerning Elisha is similar, in that a prophet comes to the aid of a foreigner, a Gentile, an “enemy” of Israel. There were many individuals in need of healing in Israel to whom God *could* have sent Elisha.))

Why not have charity begin at home in Israel?

It’s a good question. Why send humanitarian aid overseas when there is so much need in our own country? Sometimes the distance between so-called “foreigners” and ourselves helps us to understand how deeply we are all connected.

((The purpose of the stories about Elijah and Elisha is to demonstrate how spiritually deaf the people of Israel are. What better way to get their attention than to come to the aid of their enemy? Secondly, the stories show that God is God of *all* peoples, that all nations are chosen, not just Israel.))

Jesus uses these inflammatory stories to point out to his fellow Nazarenes that they don’t understand who he is and what is happening. They cannot see God acting in and through Jesus. They cannot see the new thing. What starts out as a prayer meeting turns into a volatile town meeting. The attentive congregation becomes an angry mob and seeks to murder Jesus by hurling him off a cliff.

But he passes through them and goes on his way.

Jesus has found his voice. This account early in his ministry makes it clear that he is a fearless prophet. He is ready to speak the truth in love or sometimes perhaps not in love. It looks like a very rough ride ahead for him and his followers. Indeed, the reversal of the mood of the crowd in today’s gospel prefigures the same dramatic reversal of Palm Sunday. From “Hosannas” to “Crucify him”.

Finding one's true voice can be a lifelong pilgrimage. When we find it, how do we then find courage to actually speak? Truth can hurt. Why risk relationships, job status and social position by speaking truth? It seems that Jesus did not make those calculations.

To Jeremiah, God promises not an easy life but divine protection. There is deep consolation in God's first words to Jeremiah, "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.*" These tender words are for us also. We are known and loved by God even before we begin the struggle to make sense of life and strive to understand our callings and find our voices. Jesus escapes, or is delivered, this time, but he will ultimately die for love and truth; his own, God's and ours. His voice still cries out from the cross. In the mystery of his dying lies an even deeper truth and the strong voice of silence.

How do we find our voices?

In an article entitled *Living Out Loud*, Caren Goldman writes about the recovery of her true voice.

((“Although I, like many people, never liked the sound of my own voice, and had been repeatedly told not to sing for fear of causing others to topple off key, I always thought my voice was my voice. To me it was a steady companion like my skin, eyes, ears, lips and other exposed parts. Only through a serendipitous series of events did I discover that the voice I took so much for granted was probably not my natural one. Instead, I now believe it is a surrogate for the one that was my birthright --- the one my abusive and alcoholic family of origin had stolen decades earlier...))

“Voices get lost or stolen usually in childhood --- not consciously but for survival. One day the natural voice vanishes, and you're not even aware that it's gone. For example, a child who unabashedly goes along saying what she thinks, feels and believes to those whom she loves may suddenly feel it's risky to do that. So she stops, despite not knowing why she no longer feels safe speaking the truth.

((In other cases, a child may no longer brave singing in public --- either his song or another's -- and so melodies that once flowed boldly past his lips circle silently in his head, instead...))

Goldman speaks of a person at a healing conference who found her voice.

“The woman had a disfiguring scar from a harelip, and throughout the week she never spoke. Each day, as our group of about forty-five gathered in a large barn to sing the sacred song of our bodies --- a process of inhaling deeply and then releasing sonorous sounds as we exhaled --- she sat silently. That is, until the last session. To everyone's surprise, just a half-hour before the workshop ended, she stepped into the center of the circle and began rhythmically inhaling and exhaling deep breaths. The breaths expanded her thin body and colored her pale face, and with each circle her mouth opened wider until it could open no more. Then magically, celestial sounds began floating everywhere.

Twenty minutes later she looked radiant --- illuminated. Her courage to give voice to her soul was stunning. It transformed the barn into sacred space, and I felt honored to be there. Later, as we walked to the dining hall, she confessed that she had never sung before. She said, ‘I tried once in a shower long ago, but I got scared and never tried again.’

Until that day!

((Goldman continues her own story. “In *my* case, I couldn’t stand in that circle. My fear of being ‘exposed’ still overpowered me. I left knowing that if I were to wholly embody my voice, Osborne’s workshop would just be the first stop on a lifelong journey.))

“Looking back now,” Goldman writes, “I see that practice has resulted in progress. Today, I can scream just for the joy of screaming on a roller coaster or a mountaintop without getting hoarse, dizzy, or afraid someone will get angry. I can also sing the stanzas of “Amazing Grace” loudly and on pitch in public...When I feel that trapdoor in my voice closing, I do all I can to keep it open. I swallow hard and focus on my breathing so that my natural voice can surface and not be forced back down by people in the present or held hostage to past patterns. Today, I choose not just to write my truth, but also to live it out loud.”

Luke 4:21-30

²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”
²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” ²⁴And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.